



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2012**

English Language A

ENGA4

(Specification 2700)

**Unit 4: Language Investigations and
Interventions**

Report on the Examination

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General

ENGA4 gives opportunities for both research and creativity. Unlike other English Language units, it tests the full range of assessment objectives, and it rewards students for bringing together and applying knowledge and skills developed in other units. Typically students taking ENGA4 in summer 2012 demonstrated a clear sense of the demands of the unit, and their teachers showed a firm grasp of how to apply the assessment criteria.

There were purposeful investigations and well-informed and stylish interventions. It was evident that many schools and colleges had built upon their previous experience when guiding their students, but there were signs too of experiment and innovation.

Language Investigation

The Language Investigation component of the folder has a focus on language intended to be spoken, a broad field ranging from spontaneous conversation through mixed-mode/mixed-media interactions and extending to scripted (or, more typically, semi-scripted) programmes and performances.

Productive areas for investigation included:

- contrasting interviewer styles (British/American, male/female, combative/coaxing)
- delivering bad news to TV contestants (The Apprentice/Young Apprentice, X-Factor and The Dragon's Den)
- gender and radio phone-in programmes (Alan Green's interactions with male and female callers in *606*)
- gender, role and status (in courtrooms, in classrooms, in the corridors of power)
- interactive roles (flirting, collaborative and competitive tasks)
- politicians' interview techniques
- TV cooks' conversational styles
- customer service language
- the same individual in different conversational roles
- a child's spoken interactions with an adult and with a younger child
- Supernanny's instructive and persuasive techniques
- trash talking before a boxing match
- Multi-Ethnic Youth Dialect and the scripted street language of *Top Boy*.

The investigations which achieved the highest marks typically had certain features in common. They:

- explicitly linked their aims and hypotheses to their prior knowledge of the chosen area of investigation, and explained precisely what they hoped to demonstrate or discover
- based their investigation securely on linguistically credible and up-to-date research and theory
- explained how the choice of data was potentially fruitful in terms of exploring their aims, and justified their focus on specific parts or aspects of the data
- considered a range of possible approaches and explained why they had chosen the one they did
- explained how variables would be identified and controlled
- gave serious attention to ethical issues and to ways of countering the observer's paradox and confirmation bias
- structured their analysis using subheadings related to their aims
- pursued a line of investigation which was genuinely exploratory

- drew precise conclusions with a clear sense of contextual factors and participants' roles and purposes
- reviewed their methodology and looked at factors which, in hindsight, could have improved the investigation
- considered further lines of investigation which would allow them to extend or refine their conclusions.

What was characteristic of the most successful students was evident, though to a lesser degree, in the achievement of many other students, the majority of whom carried out purposeful investigations, selecting achievable aims and employing a range of frameworks accurately and productively. Most had knowledge of relevant linguistic research and theory, and were able to show the value of linguistic descriptions in dealing with the significance of context and the creation of meaning.

They recognised the importance of selecting data based on spoken interaction and they chose appropriate frameworks to illuminate their data. In the case of conversational interaction they generally found that a focus on utterances, turns, exchanges and discourse markers was more productive than a concentration on sentence types. They were familiar with differing theories and explanations, and they attempted to make links between research findings and their own data. They demonstrated some awareness of contextual factors and the potential significance of a range of variables, and they reached conclusions based on what they found in the data they had selected. Their evaluations looked at ways in which they might improve subsequent investigations and suggested how they might build upon their conclusions.

Decisions taken at the initial planning stage clearly had a significant impact on students' achievement. Those who carefully matched aims to data and frameworks to aims gave themselves a clear advantage. Choosing which features to focus on was not something which all students found easy: while more successful students made confident selections based on what would be likely to prove most illuminating, others made things harder for themselves by making inappropriate choices or by concentrating on a limited range of basic features which were inherently unlikely to prove significant. Investigations based on spoken language data are likely to benefit more from consideration of discourse features, for example, rather than sentence types, and analysis based exclusively on the labelling of superficial non-fluency features is likely to lead students to concentrate on what is trivial, rather than throwing light on the significance of contextual factors in the creation of meaning.

Most students demonstrated knowledge and understanding of relevant linguistic research and theory, and the demands of AO2 were well addressed by those who used their knowledge as a starting point for the investigation, linked details and patterns in their data to previous research, and showed a clear sense of the extent to which their own findings mirrored or challenged what others had found or speculated. Less successful were attempts to parade knowledge of research in the introduction or conclusion, but to base the investigation itself around simplistic theories and out-dated research which no longer enjoy linguistic credibility.

Explicit and detailed engagement with context and meaning characterised the work of the most successful students. They looked at a range of variables, including roles and purposes, and they resisted the temptation to explain their data in terms of a single variable functioning independently and absolutely. They recognised the staged nature of many encounters recorded from television and *YouTube*, and they took account of mixed-mode issues and editing. They were aware that some interviews are more serious and momentous than others, and they did not confuse interviewer-style/persona with stereotypical assumptions about male/female speakers. By looking carefully, and without preconceptions, at their

chosen data they arrived at persuasive, well-documented conclusions and produced thoughtful evaluations.

Cautious, qualified and tentative conclusions acknowledged unexpected results while others showed how the evidence supported their hypotheses. Less effective conclusions re-iterated predictions without much proof. The common problem with some weaker investigations was their confident assumption that a highly selective study of a few speakers could show some universal truths about (usually) male and female speech, and students who simply concluded that they had (for instance) ‘proved Lakoff was right’ could not be credited with sophisticated understanding of the state of linguistic knowledge.

Most students’ work was characterised by accurate use of terminology and correct spelling of researchers’ names, but this was not universally the case and errors were not always marked as wrong. Students should be encouraged to see the difference between ‘over prestige’ and ‘overt prestige’ and between ‘adverbs of manner’ and ‘adverbs of manor’, and they should also be corrected if they confuse hyper-correction with super-politeness (as many did). Mis-spelling of Aitchison and Lakoff was common (and commonly unacknowledged), and RP was used as a label for any accent associated with wealth, intelligence or employment by the BBC.

Language Intervention

The Language Intervention component challenges students to present a linguistic debate in an appropriate and engaging form which makes it accessible to an audience which has no familiarity with specialist linguistic concepts and terminology.

For their language intervention pieces students chose to write in a variety of appropriate forms (sometimes including the model for their piece), including:

- broadsheet editorials, articles and opinion pieces
- beginners’ guides
- book reviews
- TV scripts (modelled on Stephen Fry’s *Planet Word*)
- radio scripts (modelled on *Fry’s English Delight*)
- *Guardian*/BBC blogs.

and they covered a range of suitable debate topics, such as:

- technology and change
- texting and spelling
- street speak
- RP/Accents (linked to recent news items about jobs and accent)
- the variety of Englishes: Australian, American, Hinglish
- Multi-Ethnic Youth Dialect
- The Only Way is Estuary
- Has the good ship English Language sunk? Do we need to send out our lifeboats and jackets to save her?
- recent controversies (an Essex primary school introducing elocution lessons, Northern colleges banning the use of slang on their premises, the demise of the apostrophe in Waterstones).

For the most part students chose appropriate forms for communicating serious linguistic ideas to a non-specialist audience, and the most successful handled the conventions of their chosen form with flair and gave a well-shaped tour of the issues. They were guided by a clear sense of placement and audience, recognising which publications would be likely to accommodate well-

informed and balanced discussion. The importance of choosing an appropriate form and placement for the language intervention piece cannot be over-estimated, as a misguided choice of form tended to have knock-on effects in terms of attainment across the range of marking criteria. One-sided tabloid rants did not score highly, and some other forms – notably short stories and fairy tales – proved unproductive in practice when it came to the communication of linguistic ideas and arguments. In such cases students struggled to provide balanced coverage of the range of issues and evidence pertinent to their chosen debate. Students who write pieces for radio or television may need to be reminded that it is only the words for the presenter that should be scripted: they should not script the contributions of linguistic experts, nor should they invent imaginary experts. The views of experts may be introduced as sound clips, or they may be quoted (by the presenter), read (by an actor) or summarised accurately with an appropriate attribution.

The most successful pieces entertained as well as informed their audiences. They were original, witty and well argued, guiding readers to increased understanding. Less successful pieces often displayed a tendency to condescension or adopted an accusatory, aggressive or hectoring tone, and weaker students struggled to maintain a consistent voice. In some cases students made little attempt to adapt their linguistic material for a non-specialist audience and relied optimistically and unrealistically on their audience understanding unexplained linguistic terms.

The strongest language intervention pieces demonstrated a secure grasp of the different points of view which constituted their chosen debate. They handled serious linguistic ideas and arguments and made them accessible to a non-specialist audience. They presented and evaluated the principal arguments, and they illustrated them with well-chosen examples. Less successful pieces demonstrated knowledge (in varying degrees) but did not communicate the nature of the debate clearly. Some made no attempt at balanced coverage.

The requirement for students to complete a cover sheet for their language investigations lead to greater precision in choice of form and identification of audience as well a clearer recognition of the specific nature of the debate. Not using a cover sheet or filling one in superficially often correlated with imprecise tasks that were not fully thought out. Genuine engagement with the nature of the language intervention task is essential for success, and the cover sheet provides the opportunity to establish their intentions clearly.

Administration

Most schools and colleges dealt competently with administrative matters, submitting marks and samples promptly and ensuring that candidate record forms were completed with the appropriate details and signatures. There were, however, some exceptions involving delays or inadequate presentation of coursework. Good practice was evident in detailed annotation of coursework, thoughtful highlighting of students' strengths and weakness, and sound application of the marking criteria. In some cases, however, students' errors were unchallenged, and there were occasions when it appeared that it was a student's potential that was being assessed, rather than the work submitted.

Given that it is at the planning stage that a teacher can intervene most productively to influence the development of a student's coursework, teachers are reminded that they have a consortium adviser who is available for consultation about their students' coursework proposals. The more detailed the proposal, the more the adviser will be able to provide specific advice and guidance.

Advice to students

To maximise your success you should try to do the following.

Language Investigation

- Select data which has a precise context with clearly identified audience/participants.
- Line number your data so that the evidence quoted can be checked easily and without risk of misunderstanding.
- Explain why you have chosen to explore and compare particular pieces of data and participants.
- Explain how you intend to control variables.
- Formulate clear and precise linguistic aims and hypotheses.
- Select frameworks which will help you reach conclusions about your aims and hypotheses.
- Focus on interactional and discourse features when analysing speech.
- Draw cautious conclusions about what you discovered, commenting explicitly on how far you have achieved your aims and tested your hypotheses.
- Ask yourself about the extent to which you can generalise from your conclusions, and consider further lines of investigation which might allow you to refine or extend your conclusions.

Language Intervention

- Choose a debate which is characterised by clearly distinguished points of view. It should be part of the subject matter studied for Unit 3.
- Decide where in the real world your intervention piece(s) might be published/broadcast.
- Use a cover sheet for your language intervention piece(s) and give clear information about what kind of piece you have written, who you see as the audience, what purpose(s) you aim to achieve and where you intend it to appear. You should also make clear which language issue you are covering.
- Identify the characteristics and conventions of the genre in which you intend to present the debate.
- Use engaging, non-specialist language.
- Cover the principal points of view and arguments.
- Give a range of detailed examples of how language is actually used.
- Be prepared to challenge arguments and assumptions.
- Argue and develop your own linguistically well-informed point of view on the issue.

Here are some things to avoid in order to maximise your success.

Language Investigation

- Avoid data which doesn't have clear potential for linguistic analysis.
- Avoid vague and non-linguistic aims and hypotheses.
- Avoid paraphrase when you comment on the data.
- Don't treat the evaluation as an opportunity to make claims about how much better you would have done if you had been allowed more time, space and data.

Language Intervention

- Avoid topics which are not specified as part of the subject matter covered in Unit 3.
- Don't leave your reader uncertain about your intended audience, purpose and genre.
- Don't state that you intend to place your piece in a publication which would be unlikely to print it.
- Don't adopt over-simplified or trivialised views about language.
- Don't base your intervention on unsupported assertions about language issues.
- Avoid relying on untransformed class notes.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.